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## WOMEN IN THE MICHIGAN LEGISLATURE

On January 8<sup>th</sup>, as required by the Michigan Constitution, the Legislature reconvened at twelve o'clock noon. Most of the friends and relatives in the gallery of the Senate that day perhaps did not realize that this was a day when history was being made. As the Senators raised their right hands to take the Oath of Office, eleven of those Senators were women.

Now you may not think this is very significant, but exactly four years before when I took the oath the first time, I was only the 11<sup>th</sup> woman to have ever served in the Michigan Senate. That's not to say that women have not been involved in the process. On November 2, 1920, Eva McCall Hamilton, a Republican from Grand Rapids, became the first woman in Michigan history to serve the people in this great state. In the eighty-two years that followed, one hundred and twelve other women have been elected as state legislators. Of those, twenty-one have been elected to the Senate, one hundred and seven to the House, with fifteen women having served in both bodies.

During the 1920s and 1930s, all but Senator Hamilton were elected to the House of Representatives, and all came from districts outside the Detroit-Wayne County area. During the 1940s and 1950s, the total number of women legislators remained relatively constant, but during the 1940s a trend emerged with women being elected on the Democrat ticket from the Detroit-Wayne County area. That trend continued until 1975 when three women Republicans from districts outside of Wayne County were elected to the Michigan House.

The first African-American woman to be elected was Charline White in 1950. Senator Cora Brown was elected in 1953. Of the twenty-five African American women to have served, twenty-one have been from Wayne County. Only one woman has ever represented the Upper Peninsula, Representative Cora Reynolds Anderson of L'Anse. The new House of Representatives' office building was named in her honor.

The role of women in the political process in this state extends beyond the Legislature. Martha W. Griffiths and Connie Binsfeld both held the office of Lt. Governor, and Governor Jennifer Granholm has the distinction of being the first woman Attorney General and the first woman Governor.

Women have steadily taken on a major role in leadership positions as well. On Tuesday, Representative Diane Byrum offered comments as the first woman to hold the position of Minority Leader; her assistant is also a woman. Four years ago, Senator Joanne Emmons and I became the first women ever to hold the positions of Senate Majority Floor Leader and Assistant. In the Senate today, I serve as the second highest Senator as Majority Floor Leader. Senator Patty Birkholz is serving as President Pro Tempore, and Senator Shirley Johnson is Appropriations Chairman - both positions held by women for the first time.

So, women did make history on January 8<sup>th</sup>, but the men in Lansing did as well when Senator Bill Hardiman from the Grand Rapids area became the first African-American to ever serve in the Senate Republican Caucus. Interestingly, Senator Hardiman is the only true freshman in the Senate, having never served in either the House or Senate before.

The 92<sup>nd</sup> Legislative Session is going to be a challenge to us all, as revenues are far below even the worse-case scenario figures. As Michigan faces these challenges, the leadership of women in the halls of government will continue to play a key role in finding solutions to difficult situations. I truly believe that all who took office this month are dedicated to doing what is best for the citizens of Michigan, and I look forward to a challenging session.

By Senator Bev Hammerstrom  
17<sup>th</sup> District